"I'm too valuable, too pretty,--" The words were slurred with emotion, with the effect of the potent wine.

"You are insolent--and for nearly the last time. I granted your request, did I not?"

"Spare him? You murdered him."

"I spared him hours of agony. He died a cleaner death than many warriors, quickly, with little pain."

"You could have let him go, just let him go."

"No. He had already been missed. They would have captured him within hours. I could not risk it."

"Risk what?" Despite his anger, the wine, Kirk was aware of a certain something in the Vulcan's tone and expression that he could not identify. Risk it being known that he had condoned a runaway?

"You fool, you're drunk! I should have known. Lower your voice! If taken, he would have told them everything. Oh, no one would believe I had helped him, but that you would is very believable. And I would have watched you on the executioner's field!"

Kirk was drunk, or mad. The tent wouldn't hold still, and Spock sounded--sounded. Dizzily he reached out to steady himself and found himself caught and held tight in a merciless embrace. All the strength went out of him, and he sagged back against the arms that held his weight so effortlessly. Spock's face hovered over his, the lips parted.

"You'd--really--care?" He knew he was confused. All his bones had melted, and his blood was burning through his veins, and Spock's eyes, so close, were soft under a bright film of tears. He struggled to understand, and then nearly lost his balance as Spock released him.

"I do not choose to lose a valuable piece of property against my will. Possessing you--the Warleader's prize--adds to my stature in the camp. And if I do choose to part with you, you would bring a large price in any market on Vulcan--nor would I shame myself by sending merchandise for sale that was not properly trained in obedience."

Kirk's head was clearing. Foolish to have thought anything was in store but the punishment his act deserved. Enough to get through that with the fortitude his pride demanded.

"Yes, master. May a slave inquire what his punishment is to be?" His voice was not quite as steady as he would have liked, but he forced his shoulders back and his chin up.

Spock looked at him consideringly for a moment. "If I thought it would serve any purpose, you would be whipped. But I know it would not. I derive no pleasure from pointless torture. You were right in one thing, James. If the Pavan had not tried to free you as well as himself, he might have succeeded in his escape. Let that be your punishment. And do not confuse my meaning again. I do no do this to spare you anything, and if you are insolent or disobey me, or if it becomes expedient for any reason at all, even merely to assert my authority over you before my companions, I will flog you publicly and worry about your 'beauty' and your value later. They do not matter to me nearly as much as my status among the warriors. Never forget it."

"I won't," Kirk whispered.

"Then we will retire now. It grows late and you have weapons practice in the morning. Your swordsmanship requires improvement.

He turned away, and Kirk stared at him, silently absorbing the lesson. Spock might not take delight, as Savak did, in the pain and humiliation of helpless victims, but he could dismiss the death of a slave as lightly as that of a pet bird. And Kirk had been a fool to imagine, even for a moment, there could be anything else between them.

It was about two weeks afterwards that Kirk awoke one morning to find that he had slept unusually late. Normally Spock, who had an innate time sense, woke him by rising at dawn, but on this morning the sun was high in the sky. Stretching, he turned over to find that Spock was still beside him in bed, but he seemed to be in the grip of fever. His body trembled, and waves of heat poured from his skin. Alarmed, Kirk slipped out of bed, pulled on a tunic, and called to one of the passing slaves to summon a healer.

When he came, the man made only a cursory examination, then turned to Kirk. "This is your first experience of pon farr, I take it? He is only in the early stages. I did not expect it for some weeks yet. Bathe him with cool water. He should come out of the fever soon and he will tell you what to do. There is no reason for me to return." The tent flap fell behind him before Kirk could ask what he meant.

The Human lost no time in obeying his instructions. Stripping the covers from Spock's body, he began to bathe him with cool water. Gradually the fever seemed to lessen, and at last Spock opened his eyes.

"Jim?" His voice was unusually hoarse.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Go and find Satak. Ask him to come to me."

Kirk hurried out, but the other Vulcan was nowhere to be found. He searched the camp, until one of the slaves said that he had seen Satak heading for Spock's tent. Relieved, Kirk returned, but as he neared the doorway one of the Pavan slaves ran out. His tunic was torn and blood dripped from his mouth. Kirk looked after him, then paused as he heard the voices inside the tent.

"...your foolish games, Spock. You want the Human."

"No. I will not mate with a barbarian... I cannot..." Kirk scarcely recognized his master's voice.

"Spock, your condition clouds your mind. I did not speak of taking a mate! Take the slave to your bed and use him. Gods, you've done it in the past. Will you permit your pride to kill you? You are not unique, my friend. I have, myself, experienced a temporary fixation on one particular slave, but that doesn't mean I intended to mate with one. When the time passes, you will forget him."

"You don't understand. I fear..."

"There is no need to fear. The pon farr strips us of everything, doesn't it? And all of us alike." Satak's voice was gentle. "Let me summon James."